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Curb on leaks called threat to free speech

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration's expanded program aimed at curbing classified information leaks to the news media ran into sharp criticism Tuesday at the Senate's first hearing on the plan.

Sen. Charles Mathias, R-Md., said the potential danger to freedom of speech was strong enough that the administration should delay implementation of the plan, which would, among other things, force more than 100,000 federal employees with access to classified data to submit their articles, speeches and books for pre-publication screening for the rest of their lives.

"A broad interpretation of the president's directive would consign these thousands of men and women to a virtual vow of silence on some of the crucial issues facing our nation," said Mathias, who convened the Governmental Affairs Committee hearing on the plan, first unveiled in a presidential directive in March.

The program was designed

to slow down what Justice Department official Richard K. Willard called the "startlingly frequent occurrence" of leaks of classified information.

CIA officials and certain others are already covered by review procedures upheld by the Supreme Court, but the Reagan plan would impose the requirement on employees throughout the government.

Willard insisted that the plan would not be abused to censor critical or embarrassing disclosures. But senators at the hearing were skeptical.

Sen. Thomas Eagleton, D-Mo., said the broad scope of the directive "strikes at the heart of the ability of the public to be informed," and could intimidate public servants.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said another aspect of the plan that would increase the use of polygraph or lie detector tests in leak investigations "could stifle legitimate comment" by government employees.

Former CIA director William Colby disagreed. He advocated criminal penalties for the disclosure of classified information.